

Little Things by YumeArashi

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Summary:

Jonathan Byers isn't someone Steve would have wanted to witness his breakdown, but he didn't really have much say in the matter.

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Author's Note:

I have done my best to write a respectful and realistic portrayal of PTSD, if you feel that this fic is in any way inaccurate or disrespectful, please do let me know (in a civil fashion preferably) so I can either improve or remove it. Does contain warning for Steve being very negative toward himself for the PTSD.

When Nancy asked Steve to swing by the hospital to deliver to Jonathan the classwork he'd missed over the last several days, Steve didn't think anything of it. He took the binder, grinned as he flipped through it and teased Nancy about the meticulous organization - highlights and little colored tabs, seriously, Nance? - and stuffed it in his backpack.

(Had she made one for Barb, too? Had she hoped her friend would come back? Had she known better deep down but made one anyway, defiantly copying notes and compiling pages into a talisman of hope?)

(No, he concluded. She had spent her time and energy not in trying to deny Barb's fate but in trying to *change* it.)

He drove over after school, whistling tunelessly and mulling over how Nancy might feel about chipping in to buy Jonathan a camera for Christmas. He pulled into a parking spot and headed inside, pausing on his way upstairs to pop into the gift shop. You didn't visit people in the hospital and show up empty handed, even he knew that. Was the kid too old for a teddy bear? Steve shrugged and got it anyway. Kid could probably use it, after spending a week in what was apparently a literal hellhole.

Jonathan looked up quick as a whip when Steve knocked, tension melting into a smile. Will was asleep and Joyce was absent - gone down to the cafeteria, Jonathan explained as he took the teddy and placed it in Will's arms, smiling to see his little brother instinctively

cuddle it.

As he turned back to Steve, Jonathan knocked over a potted plant, a thoughtful gift from some well-wisher or other, spilling a little of its rich soil onto the bedside table.

A rainbow of light flickering wildly, the smell of gasoline and rotted meat, the whistling warble, the obscene shape revealed by frenzied illumination. Someone's voice shouting, screaming, the words lost in the madness. A hand grabbing him by the wrist, yanking away from the impossible horror in the living room.

A potted plant, overturned. Steve's eyes fixing on that of all things amidst the chaos, his brain crazily prompting the hope that it would survive.

"Steve. Steve! Look at me, man. Look at me. It's over. You're safe now. You're safe."

Steve's world slowly came back into focus, his chest still heaving in panicked gasps for air he couldn't seem to draw into his lungs, his heart beating fit to burst.

"That's it, that's better. Deep breaths, nice and slow. In, out. Easy."

Jonathan looked worried, Steve noted distantly, struggling to match his breathing to the other boy's. Long thin hands gripped Steve's shoulders firmly, warm and strong and anchoring. Steve focused on Jonathan's eyes, dark and intent, not wide with fear like they had been that night.

He slowed his breathing, listening to Jonathan's words and letting them sink in. He was in the here and now. It was over. He was safe.

After a few minutes he had calmed enough to run a shaking hand through his hair and drop his gaze. "Sorry."

"Don't be. Here, sit."

Steve all but collapsed into the uncomfortable little plastic chair, grateful for a source of the support no longer provided by his weak legs.

Jonathan handed him a glass of water and Steve sipped at it, taking a deep breath. "Sorry," he said again, unnecessarily. "Don't know what that was."

"Hopper calls them flashbacks. Says it's pretty normal after a thing like this." Jonathan bit his lip, then reached out an arm as if to settle it around Steve's shoulders. "If you want. I mean. Not to be weird. Just, you know. It helps."

Steve nodded and felt the warm weight settle over him. It did help. Had Hopper done this for Jonathan? Had Joyce? Had Jonathan done this for Will? "So...you too?"

Jonathan nodded. "I had to take down that poster of Jaws in my room, all those teeth were..." he trailed off for a moment, making a visible effort to stay in the present. "Mom can't stand to see a flag, something about Will's hideout being wrecked in the Upside Down. For Nancy it's the smell of gas, she never borrows the family car anymore because her folks insist she fill the tank and she can't get within two blocks of a gas station. She said Mike can't even look at a chalkboard anymore. Even Hopper too - he won't go near the library. It's not just you."

Steve leaned closer to Jonathan. The words were an immense relief. "It's such a stupid thing."

"We all feel that way. But that doesn't make it any less real when it happens. Or any less awful. Hopper says it'll get better with time, though."

"Sure hope so. Hate to spend the rest of my life freaking out whenever anyone knocks over a goddamned plant. Or whatever other stupid little thing is gonna bite me in the ass out of nowhere."

Jonathan gave his shoulder a squeeze. "We'll get better," he said with a confidence his expression didn't echo. "No one goes through hell and walks away whistling. We can't expect to deal with a thing like that and not have some scars, even if they're on the inside. But scars heal."

"It helps that you get it," Steve admitted quietly, by now leaning fully

against Jonathan's chest. "I go to school and it's like...no one's real. People like Tommy and Carol, they're just cardboard cutouts, props in some sick play because they've never seen the curtain pulled back. It's just the tiny handful of us that know what's really out there, we understand, everyone else is busy with the stupidest bullshit. Who's lent some girl his letter jacket, who's flunking math, who's sleeping around. That shit doesn't *matter*," he said with a burst of bitter savagery.

"Yeah," Jonathan agreed. "But you're not alone. Nancy and I, we get it. You can always talk to us. And as adults go, Hop's pretty cool. If you need more help than Nancy and I can give, you can talk to him. Or my mom, if you need...mom stuff. She adores you, you know? Keeps getting on my case to ask you to stop by so she can, and I quote, 'hug the stuffing out of the hero who saved my baby boy'," Jonathan grinned.

Steve felt his cheeks turn pink. "Yeah, well. Guess I should stick around for a bit then, give her the chance."

Jonathan pulled him a little closer. "Good choice."